

moved or uttered a word—not even the Brazzles. Zora took that as a cue to begin. Everyone was eager for a story, and we all knew that nobody could tell a story better than Zora.

"I finished up my chores early last night so I could go out on the porch and catch fireflies over at the Blue Sink." Fireflies are so thick there at night, you can just put out your arm and they'll land on it. You don't even have to try to catch them. "I couldn't have been there more than ten minutes, and I'd already filled my jar, when I heard a strange whistling sound."

You could hear us holding our breath, it was so quiet.

"What kinda whistling?" Ralph Hardiman asked, his eyebrows raised like clothespins were keeping them up.

"Strange-sounding, not like any bird or person I ever heard make," Zora said. "But that wasn't the worst of it. The night started getting dark and misty, and the fireflies started disappearing. Soon I couldn't make out a thing in front of me until I got near Mr. Pendar's house."

"Then what happened?" Teddy and I asked in unison.

"I was surrounded by white fog, but not thick like

clouds. Nuh-uh. It was stringy—like spiderwebs!" She suddenly waved her fingers at us like they were daddy longlegs, and half the circle jumped back. But nobody laughed.

"Then, as fast as it started, the spiderweb fog disappeared. I was flat on my belly in wet grass, right close up to Mr. Pendar's porch, in the dark. I didn't even realize I'd gotten that close. I lay there for a long minute, still as a stone, trying to steady my eyes on the glowy light inside the house."

Half a dozen voices: "What you see?"

"The screen door swung open." Zora paused for effect. "Out of the light stepped Mr. Pendar. But where his nose and mouth should have been, he had a long, flat gator snout!"

"A gator snout?" we all shouted—even Stella Brazzle, in spite of herself.

Zora nodded slowly. "That's right," she said. "Mr. Pendar looked like a gator man—man body, gator head! That's his secret. And *that's* how come can't no gator kill him!"

One thing about gators that folks outside our parts don't usually know is that they make loud hissing sounds. Not all the time—only when one of their young is in trouble. It's a call to arms, and it sounds